



Ben Wright  
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Columbus Mayor Jim Wetherington and an attorney representing the city took their fight against online travel companies to Washington in a Wednesday meeting with the Blue Dog Democrats.

Last year the city won rulings from the Georgia Supreme Court against Expedia Inc. and hotels.com, agreeing the city is owed lodging taxes on the amount a customer pays for a room instead of the discounted room rate paid by the website. Columbus hotels were delisted by Expedia.com and other travel websites after the city filed suit in 2006.

The city still has court action pending against Orbitz, a third online travel company and others.

"There is concern about this Expedia issue throughout the country," said Wetherington, who attended the meeting with attorney Trip Tomlinson of Pope, McGlamry, Kilpatrick, Morrison & Norwood in Columbus. "We are the poster child, so to speak, because we filed a suit and they delisted us."

The meeting with about 30 members of Congress, other mayors and leaders from the hospitality industry was to alert the lawmakers about possible language being crafted to pre-empt sales taxing authority to local governments, said U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop, D-Albany, who represents the Georgia 2nd Congressional District and is a member of the Blue Dog Coalition. The group, described as moderate to conservative Democrats, is made up of 54 members of the House who are generally pro business and committed to compromise and bipartisanship.

Such a bill would impact Columbus and the recent court ruling.

“It would undo the win the city of Columbus had with Supreme Court,” Bishop said Friday.

Bishop, an attorney, said leaders from across the country are concerned about language that could be tacked on or slipped into another piece of legislation without getting noticed.

“If it were to be offered, we would try to insist that it go through regular order than to be slipped in,” Bishop said. “That way, it could be debated.”

Bishop said he wasn’t aware of any language floating around the Capitol, but the alert has been sent out. He noted there are some interests among a few members of Congress who could offer an amendment.

City Attorney Clifton Fay said city officials heard about a possible legislative move in the battle against online travel companies during the Christmas holiday.

“Online companies, they see the writing on the wall,” he said.

Attorney Jerry A. Buchanan of Buchanan & Land LLP in Columbus represents Expedia and others. He said he wasn’t aware of the meeting the mayor and Tomlinson had with the Blue Dogs.

Although the city won rulings from the Georgia Supreme Court, Fay said no resolution has been made on the taxes due the city of Columbus.

“They are all pending but we are trying to negotiate back and forth on a settlement,” he said.

Fay said it would be a terrible blow to cities across the nation if they aren’t able to collect the proper taxes from online travel companies.

“These type suits are pending all over the country,” he said.